A beautiful thing done for Christ

Text: Mark 14:1-9

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 25:34-40; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Mark 14:1-9

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 63b, 502, 41, 271, 209

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#47)

**Theme:** At Bethany, a woman anoints the poor man Jesus with very expensive perfume, anticipating his death and burial; as Jesus foretells the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world

**Proposition:** Be encouraged, your personal, sacrificial devotion to Christ beautifully adorns the proclamation of the gospel

**Introduction**

What is beauty? Here is a definition: ‘*a combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight*’. For example, someone might say “I was struck by her beauty”. Here are some women thought by many to be very beautiful: Zendaya, Bella Hadid, Ana de Armas, Priyanka Chopra, Beyonce Knowles. Physically attractive men are generally referred to as being ‘handsome’ rather than ‘beautiful’. Here are some men thought by many to be very handsome: Ryan Reynolds, Hrithik Roshan, Chris Hemsworth, Henry Cavill, Idris Elba.

How many handsome men and beautiful women in the Bible can you think of that were pleasing to the eye in their outward form and appearance? Here is a list from the Old Testament: Sarah (Gen 12:11,14); Rebekah (Gen 24:16); Rachel (Gen 29:17), Joseph (Gen 39:6), Moses (Exo 2:2); Job’s daughters (Job 42:15); Saul (1 Sam 9:2); David (1 Sam 16:12, 18; 1 Sam 17:42); Abigail (1 Sam 25:3), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2, Abishag (David’s nurse), Adonijah (son of David), Vashti (Esther 1:1), Esther (Esther 2:7).

Outward beauty is a gift from God, although it can be a source of pride, vanity, conceit, self-admiration and narcissism in some people. Remember the words that God spoke to the prophet Samuel when he met Jesse’s sons looking for the one to anoint as king? “*The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart*." (1 Sam 16:7b)

As we come to our text today in Mark 14, we meet a woman in Bethany who has been described as ‘*one of the most beautiful characters in all of Scripture*’. We don’t know what her outward form and appearance looked like, but we do know her very attractive heart revealed through what she did for Christ’s body. Jesus spoke very highly of her, saying ‘*She has done a beautiful thing to me*’ (v6). The Greek word translated ‘beautiful’ describes something which is inherently excellent, providing some special or superior benefit. In classical Greek literature this word referred to that which was ‘morally beautiful’ or noble. Some English translations render the two words ‘beautiful thing’ as ‘good deed’ (NAS) or ‘good work’ (NKJ).

As we carefully consider the ‘beautiful thing’ that a woman of beautifully noble character did for Christ a few days before He was killed and buried, we’ll firstly focus on the woman and her work, then on Jesus, and finally on the gospel. Here are our three points:

1. A costly act of devotion
2. A poor man about to die
3. A gospel proclaimed to the whole world
4. **A costly act of devotion**

We’ve been working through this preaching series in Mark’s Gospel for a little over two years now. The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and has been famously described as “*a passion narrative with an extended introduction*” (Martin Kähler in The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ, 80 n. 11). The focus of this gospel builds towards the final four chapters where Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the annual Jewish Passover festival.

Notice how our text in chapter 14 begins “*It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread*”. Mark places the anointing of Jesus with expensive ointment after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The week leading up to the death and burial of Christ is often called ‘passion’ or ‘holy’ week. Christ’s entry into Jerusalem took place at the start of this week – on Sunday. He cleansed the Temple on the Monday, and taught the disciples on the Mount of Olives (Olivet Discourse) on the Tuesday. Mark records that Jesus eat at the house of Simon the leper (whose leprosy must have been cured for him to receive people into his home) in Bethany on the Wednesday ‘*two days before the Passover*’.

The Passover commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and was celebrated on the 14th of the month of Nisan (April/May), continuing into the early hours of 15th (between sunset and midnight (Exo 12:6-20, 48; Num 9:2-14; Deut 16:1) and was followed immediately by the Feast of Unleavened Bread on 15th-21st days of the month (Exo 12:15-20; 23:15; 34:18; Deut 16:1-8).

There is a parallel passage in Matthew’s gospel which matches Mark’s account, but there is also a record of what reads like the same event in John’s gospel (12:1-8), but he writes that it occurred ‘*six days before the Passover*’ (12:1). So there are two possibilities: Either John is recording a separate, but very similar event, which took place 4 days before the one Mark and Matthew describe; or, It is the same event and Mark has placed it closer to the actual Passover date perhaps to more closely associate the pre-burial anointing of Jesus with the plot to kill Him.

It seems very likely that this is indeed the same event at Bethany recorded by Mark, Matthew and John. If so, then the woman who came ‘*with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard*’ was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus – who Jesus had raised from the dead (John 11) because John identifies her in his account. This woman in Bethany is not to be confused with the ‘*woman of the city*’ recorded by Luke (7:36-50) who also brought an alabaster flask of ointment, anointed Jesus, and kissed His feet. This woman of Bethany was devoted to Jesus, she spared no expense in her act of anointing Him.

Alabaster is a type of gypsum, in its pure form white or translucent. It is found with limestone deposits in caves and at the source of springs. In Bible times it was often used for making ointment jars, and was considered a luxury item. Nard was a very expensive fragrance/perfume, an aromatic oil extracted from a root native to India. The high value of this perfume suggests that it was likely a family heirloom passed on from one generation to another.

Whilst anointing was a common custom at feasts (cf. Ps 23:5; 141:5; Luke 7:46), in this special instance it was an act of devotion and thanksgiving. Mary had much to thank Jesus for. He had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. She had sat at Christ’s feet, carefully listening to His teaching (Luke 10:39); unlike her sister Martha who was ‘distracted with much serving’ (Luke 10:40). If she was the woman at Bethany, did she understand that she was anointing Jesus’ body beforehand for burial? (v8). It seems very likely. If so, she not only understood the prophecies that Jesus had repeatedly given about His coming death, but she also firmly believed them to be true. In which case it was out of pure radiant faith that she served the Lord so beautifully.

You and I are not able to serve Jesus by anointing his body before His death and burial around 2,000 years ago. That’s obvious! Yet we are able to serve Him by doing beautiful, costly things for His Body the church. We heard the words of Jesus earlier from Matthew 25 about providing for the physical needs of His family of faith and visiting them if they are sick or in prison. On the day of Judgement Christ will say of these acts of service: “*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me*.” (Matt 25:40).

Do these good and beautiful works help to save us? No, brothers and sisters, ‘*by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*’ (Eph 2:8-9). In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32, A86: “*We do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbours may be won over to Christ*”. It is to Him that we now turn in our second point.

1. **A poor man about to die**

Famously beautiful women and widely acclaimed handsome men are often materially wealthy. As far as I am aware, the ten contemporary actors and models names I listed earlier are not short of money. The woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper had a flask of very expensive ointment. If this was indeed a family heirloom and she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, then she and her family were not poor. Yet she generously and sacrificially gave a very special and materially valuable gift to Jesus.

Remember that whilst He was given expensive treasures by the wise men at his birth: gold, frankincense and myrrh, He grew up in a relatively poor household in Nazareth. In adult life Jesus owned very few possessions. He said, “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*.” (Matt 8:20). When He entered Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey on the first day of this passion week, he just had the ‘clothes on his back’. These garments would be divided amongst those who would crucify Him on the Friday of that week, as Mark will record in chapter 15 (v24). So the wealthy woman at Bethany was giving a very expensive gift to the poor man Jesus.

Mark records that some there said to themselves indignantly “*Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor*”. To get a rough idea of the equivalent value of this flask of nard in New Zealand today we could take a day’s wage at minimum adult pay rate (currently $22.70), say $181. Multiply by 300 = $54,480. In his account, John records that it was Judas Iscariot who asked this question (John 12:4). They then ‘scolded’ the woman. The underlying Greek word means to ‘*be moved with anger, to admonish sternly, exhibit irritation and/or a harsh reproof*’’. It was used in the ancient world to describe the snorting of horses. The verb form of ‘scolded’ in the text (indicative imperfect) indicates that this angry ‘snorting’ at the woman was continuous over a period of time, not just a single action.

Notice that the woman does not defend herself in the face of sustained sharp criticism. Instead, she calmly endures the verbal attacks. It is Jesus who reacts to this ‘snorting’ at the woman. He said “*Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me*”. She had done a good deed, a good work; a noble task which was publicly commended by Christ. Jesus was by no means denying the command of God to care for the poor. Christ knows the Word of God better than any other human being. For example, He was familiar with: Psalm 41.1 “*Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him*”. (Also ref Ex 23:10, 11; Lev 19:10; Prov 14:21b, 31; Isa 58:7 and NT 2 Cor 8:1-9; Gal 6:2, 9, 10, 2 Thes 3:13; James 5:1-6). And Deuteronomy 15:11 “*For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'*”

It is this verse that Jesus quotes as He says in verse 7: “*For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me*”. This lavish gift of expensive perfume by the relatively wealthy woman to the poor man Jesus was not wasteful, it would be the last gift given to Him on this earth because soon He would be no longer be alive. Jesus would suffer a criminal’s death by public execution. The bodies of poor convicted felons were not anointed with perfume, but dumped in unmarked graves as though they had never existed. Jesus explains “*She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial*” (v8). This woman had done a beautiful thing, one that would accompany the gospel all over the world down through the ages. Today, coming all the way to us here in Christchurch New Zealand, which brings us to our final point.

1. **A gospel proclaimed to the whole world**

Have you ever wondered if your small acts of service for Christ’s Body, the church, are really worth the effort? The visits to help others in the congregation, sending encouraging emails and texts, going out in the evening for another church ministry related meeting, inviting others into your home, managing church finances and so many other things. Have you have been sharply criticized for serving in ways that others may strongly disagree with? Perhaps expecting thanks, but only receiving stern reproof? Have you ever been tempted to leap to your own defence?

There is valuable treasure in God’s Word for us all this morning. Rich encouragement for us to serve - and continue to serve - the Lord and His church, even, at times, in the face of opposition from our fellow brothers and sisters. Look at the final words of Christ to those present in Simon the Leper’s house that day when the woman at Bethany did a beautiful thing for Him: ‘*And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her*.’ (v9). Really? That surely must have seemed like a rather far-fetched exaggeration to those who first heard these words. A woman in the small settlement of Bethany with a flask of perfume to be remembered all over the world where the gospel is proclaimed? Surely such a small seemingly insignificant detail would not be remembered and proclaimed? Yet, here we are today having heard about this woman and her good work of faith-filled service about 2,000 years later on the other side of the world. The prophetic words of Jesus are true! Not only here in Scripture, but everywhere in the Bible!

Beautiful women often wear beautiful clothes and fashion accessories like jewellery and exquisite handbags. Similarly handsome men may wear a very well-tailored suit with cufflinks and a fancy tiepin. The beauty of the woman or the handsome features of the man don’t come from their clothes and accessories – these simply enhance and draw attention to what is already there. So it is with good, beautiful deeds done for Christ, they themselves do not save people, nor do they have glory apart from the Lord, but they do enhance and draw attention to the gospel of salvation.

As we draw to a close, let’s consider how the beautiful deed of this woman adorns the glorious gospel. Firstly, notice the background to her beautiful deed. “*the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, ‘Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.’”* (v1b-2). Demonstrations and riots were relatively commonplace at the Passover when deliverance from bondage was at the forefront of people’s minds. Jewish historian Josephus estimates that the population of Jerusalem increased from 50,000 to 3,000,000 for the Passover. The upper figure is very likely an exaggeration, a more reasonable count would be around 250,000. Whatever the number of people, it was a very large volatile crowd that the chief priests and scribes feared.

The enemies of Christ were intent on not arresting him and killing him during the period of the Passover and Feast of unleavened Bread when there were so many people in the city. But God had other plans, plans to save His people from their sins through the substitutionary sacrifice of His only Beloved Son during the feast which celebrated His deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. Just as God ordained the exact timing of Jesus’ death and burial, so He also precisely determined that the woman at Bethany would have expensive ointment to anoint the body of Christ before His death and burial.

So, you might say, well she was a special case, my acts of service are not like that. Not so brother and sister! “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*” (Eph 2:10). Your acts of service, the beautiful things you do for the body of Christ, have also been prepared by God before, so go and do them, keep on doing them! Many beautiful works go unnoticed by others, but the Lord sees and knows the heart from which we serve Christ’s body. The woman’s work was seen by many – and also criticized! She helpfully teaches us not to jump at the chance to justify ourselves in the eyes of others who may scorn and mock us, particularly where our faith and faithful works are concerned.

Author Dane Ortland has helpfully pointed out that as image bearers of God, ‘*we are pieces of art, designed to be beautiful and thus draw attention to our artist*’. In fact we become more beautiful in character ourselves when we adorn the beautiful, glorious gospel of the beautiful Saviour Christ with our good works (ref. 1 Pet 2:12). His glorious beauty is revealed in the poetic language of Song of Solomon e.g. 5:16b “*He is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend*”. Also in the words of Psalm 45:2 “*You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever*”.

Suffering; physically, mentally, and/or spiritually can be very unattractive to see. Think of the images on our device screens of the wounded and afflicted in war zones like Gaza and Ukraine. The cross to which Christ was resolutely heading on that Wednesday of Passion week was a scene of terrible ugliness. Isaiah prophesies “*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him*” (Isaiah 52:2b). On the cross, the beauty of Christ, who is the radiance of the glory of God (Heb 1:3), was marred. God made His Son ‘*to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God*’ (2 Cor 5:21). Could we say that on the cross Jesus became the ugliest human being ever to live? I think that is an accurate statement if we include not only the physical aspects of his death on the cross, but also the spiritual dimensions of His coming under the full weight of God’s wrath against all the sins of all His people.

Brothers and sisters ‘*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*’ (2 Cor 8:9). The altogether desirable, perfectly handsome, infinitely wealthy Son of God exchanged His beauty and possessions for utter ugliness and poverty so that you and I could be beautiful and rich in Him. He also served us so that out of faith in, and love for, our Saviour we would do beautiful things for Him thereby adorning the gospel which is proclaimed in the whole world.

Brothers and sisters, be encouraged! Your personal, sacrificial devotion to Christ beautifully adorns the proclamation of the gospel. Keep doing beautiful things for Jesus!

AMEN.